Review of Michael Snodin, ed. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, a Universal Man (Yale 1991)

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Prussian state architect whose many classical buildings, bridges, and plans gave Berlin its distinctive urban image. The book’s publication celebrated the one-hundredfifteenth anniversary of Schinkel’s birth, and coincides with the renewed importance of Berlin as the capital of a unified Germany. Snodin’s elegantly designed book consists of a richly illustrated catalogue from a 1991 London exhibition of many of Schinkel’s paintings, drawings, designs, and furniture, a set of historical photographs of his buildings, many of which were destroyed in the war, and a series of seven short thematic essays. The essays, all but two of which were translated from the German, each describe one aspect of Schinkel’s extraordinarily diverse artistic production: his paintings and stage designs, his architectural theory, the state buildings and plans he did for Berlin, the many royal residences he designed in Potsdam, and his role in centralizing the fledgling Prussian arts and crafts industry.

The most provocative essays are Martin Geelen’s comparison of Schinkel’s Altes Museum in Berlin with the design theories of the Frenchman J.-L. Durand, and Alex Potts’s analysis of Schinkel’s architectural theory. Potts’s essay, for example, attempts to distinguish between the various theoretical stances that were circulating in architectural circles throughout Europe after Napoleon, and from which Schinkel drew inspiration. Using quotes from unfinished theoretical manuscripts, Potts shows how Schinkel struggled constantly to balance the dignity and ideal classical forms of the Greek temple and the symbolism and structural integrity of Germany’s own Gothic style, with the ever increasing need for a new, industrial architecture that was more abstract and modern than either. Whereas Schinkel still managed to synthesize these seemingly conflicting tendencies, subsequent generations of “Schinkel’schule” architects tended towards even more extreme solutions that eventually led to the eclecticism of the Gründerzeit and the Wilhelmine era.

Although together the essays attempt to provide an overall portrait of this “universal man” with so many talents, their length precluded a thorough analysis of Schinkel or his legacy. Unlike Barry Bergdoll’s recent monograph, Karl Friedrich Schinkel: Architect (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), these authors seldom go beyond the vast scope of extant German-language scholarship. As the author himself admits, however, “the aim of the book is not to be a profound and wide-ranging analysis of Schinkel scholarship, but to be a general introduction to Schinkel in English.” The book will have been a success, he claims, if it inspires English speakers to inquire about Schinkel and perhaps even to visit Berlin and Potsdam.

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Michael Snodin’s catalogue is the first monograph to be published in English on the diverse talents of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841), the influential...